



**OCEANIC SOCIETY
QUARTERS 35 N, FORT MASON
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94123 USA**

December 9, 2007

To: MLPA Initiative Stakeholder Committee:

RE: Farallon Islands Boat Access Restrictions

The Oceanic Society, a nonprofit marine conservation organization, requests that the MLPA Committee consider the following comments when addressing Farallon Islands Bird/Mammal Disturbance Issues or when considering any change in current U.S. Fish and Wildlife boat approach restrictions.

Established in 1972, the nonprofit Oceanic Society's purpose is to protect endangered wildlife and preserve threatened marine habitats worldwide. The Society's mission is primarily accomplished through the creation of protected natural areas, supported and sustained through scientific research.

Our approach to environmental protection includes fostering a conservation ethic. Our educational Farallon Islands boat trips serve as a platform for achieving that goal. The Society pioneered trips for the public to the Farallon Islands in 1984 and has offered them on an annual, weekly basis from May through November. Groups such as the American Association of Geographers, Smithsonian, Girls Scouts, and Point Reyes Bird Observatory have cosponsored this educational opportunity.

Our interpretative staff includes professional wildlife biologists and educators from institutions such as the California Academy of Sciences, the Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association, and the East Bay Regional Park District. Through their collective experience, they have shaped the interpretive program and worked with boat captains to avoid any potential disturbance.

Please consider our educators and biologists comments regarding changing minimum access standards, from the current U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service boat restrictions of 300 feet of most of the shoreline of the Farallon Islands, in relation to their ability to teach and foster a conservation ethic:

- “The extended limits would substantially change the interpretive program. In particular, it would impact members of the general public without binoculars. These are often the people who have the least practical experience with nature observation. Fundamentally, our approach is to foster a conservation ethic among the public by showing them the wildlife resources. For the less-than-experienced, it will be harder to develop an appreciation for the resources if they cannot see them well. When at the SEFI, I mainly do “directed observation” rather than lecturing. The balance between the two with the new restriction would be pushed in the direction of lecturing as opposed to direct observation. I would like to see the rationale for any suggested change in order to make an informed comment. Although I am a Certified Wildlife Biologist with over 25 years of experience leading nature trips to the Farallones (as well as spending time on the island as a research volunteer), I do not have any data on disturbance reactions of the wildlife. Anecdotally, I have not observed any adverse impacts from the 300-foot buffer. However, if data are available, I would like to review them. I believe that a meaningful interpretive program could be achieved even with a 1000-foot buffer. However, the immediacy of the experience is greater with the smaller buffer. And the quality of the experience, I believe, helps foster a conservation ethic among the participants.”
- “I think the current U.S.F&W standards are appropriate. My teaching ability would be compromised if the access restriction was extended to 1,000 feet.”
- “Primarily, it will limit the public’s ability to see Steller sea lions and N. fur seals. I feel the 300-ft limit is sufficient to protect wildlife at SEFI, and extending this zone is unnecessary. I believe the problem is that some boats do not respect the 300-ft limit. I’ve repeatedly observed boats coming within less than 300 ft from shore even when wildlife onshore are showing clear signs of disturbance (i.e. heads raised, head bobbing, fluttering, etc).”
- “Currently the interpretive program is based on what we see --- at 1000 feet we will not be able to see the concentration of birds or any of the bird behavior and therefore can not point out any of this. Therefore, the information would focus on what you can’t see. It is much more rewarding to show people the “actual”, the “real life” – seeing the numbers of birds on the islands helps to reinforce the message about conservation of a sensitive area. We are able to get that message across now with the current restrictions --- we mention why we can’t go to certain areas and show pictures of the animals that are breeding in those areas i.e. Steller sea lions, Fur seals. With a 1000 feet limit, I would have to resort to using laminated pictures of what you can not see. This will definitely change the quality of the trip. There would be no “wow” moment at seeing thousands of murres shoulder to shoulder surrounded by the tower nests of Brandt’s cormorants. Based on my experience with the captains, 300 feet is sufficient. The naturalists and the captains work together to insure that we approach all wildlife with caution, that we do not use the PA system or shout when close to the rocks, and share experience on how to work around the islands. I have worked for the

- National Park Service on a winter bird census for 10 years. The census takes place on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. Over a million visitors a year come to the island which has a population of over 100 breeding seabirds nests (including Western Gull, Brandt Cormorant). We have not seen a reduction in nesting by these 2 species due to disturbance of people walking by or talking/shouting around their nest sites. This has been documented by the PRBO biologists who annually monitor the nest sites. I have been working on the Oceanic Farallon Island trips since the late 1980s and have not seen any obvious signs of stress by the sea lions or birds when we approach in a cautious slow manner. Plus, I have often asked biologists on the island if they think our boats are disturbing the wildlife: they have repeatedly reassured us that we were not a threat. Therefore, from my many years of observation I do not think that new restrictions are warranted. “

The Oceanic Society supports the MLPA Initiative as well as enhanced protections for marine wildlife. Based on our experience, we believe current restrictions are adequate unless there is conclusive data to support an extended access distance to the Farallon Islands is necessary to protect the integrity of seabird colonies and pinniped haul outs. We recommend a study be conducted at the Farallon Islands that specifically looks at questions of disturbance. We support the concept of adaptive management including reassessing potential disturbance on a consistent basis. We also recommend that outside funding be appropriated for enforcement of current restrictions.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Birgit Winning
Executive Director
Oceanic Society